

Acton Comprehensive Community Plan

How can we preserve what we most appreciate about Acton, make changes and improvements where needed, while addressing key concerns regarding the future?

By developing a Comprehensive Community Plan.

What will Acton be like in 5 years? 10 years? 20 years? If we do nothing to change the Town... will it stay the same? What would change? What would we like to change? How shall we go about making Acton an even better place to live, work and play? What shall we do to protect what we most appreciate about our Town and prepare for future contingencies?

Acton 2020, a planning process with extensive public involvement, is about to unveil the results of almost four years worth of work that included efforts to understand resident desires and concerns, document existing conditions, analyze trends and develop an action plan with specific strategies to achieve the vision and goals developed with significant public input.

The planning process offers each of us an opportunity to participate in our community's self-government. The process has allowed us to step back and make sure that we continue to create a community that supports and expresses us while ensuring its continuation for future generations. Today, with rapid change happening all around us, it is important to continue to take steps to guide Acton's future in sustainable ways that meet the needs of all who live and work in our ever-evolving community.

We have reached out to residents and business owners in Town. We have asked again and again: "What is important to you?" What do you care about the most? What do you feel the Town needs to do now to prepare for the future? The community conversation was sustained throughout the process; connections made between Town government and residents and business owners, and amongst residents are intended to be long lasting and continuous. We hope to move forward together to ensure that Acton evolves the way its residents wish.

Can I still Comment on the Plan? The public comment period will extend to >>>>. The entire plan may be found at: <http://acton2020.info/> and at Town Hall.

KEY UNDERLYING THEMES

The following are key themes that emerged from the community conversation with Acton residents¹. The Plan makes a concerted effort to address these.

An increased 'sense of community'

- **Community gathering:** desire for indoor and outdoor places and events to meet and interact casually, spontaneously as well as in a planned, more formal fashion.
- **Town character:** desire to preserve and enhance features --physical and other -- including a commitment to excellence in education, rural and historic characteristics, and small town feeling, which make Acton unique and contribute to its sense of community.
- **Connectivity:** desire for walking, biking, public transportation; traffic calming and improvements; increased opportunities for social networks and connections

The 'future resilience' of the Town

- **Environmental sustainability:** concern regarding the survivability of the environment due to overuse, abuse and neglect.
- **Social and economic diversity,** concern regarding ability to accommodate a range of socio-economic levels as well as the ability to age in place.
- **Financial viability:** concern regarding the ability of the Town to protect its assets and maintain a viable balance between taxes and services provided.

¹The planning process included significant outreach to Acton residents through public meetings, web- and mail-based survey, telephone survey, focus groups, several thematic workshops, interactive internet forums (e.g. website, Facebook and blog) and other venues. Over 2,000 residents replied to surveys and/or attended meetings. Detailed documentation of these responses can be found at <http://acton2020.info/>

What does the Comprehensive Community Plan include?

- ❖ **A Roadmap to Guiding Growth.** Acton can't avoid all future growth, but it can guide the expected growth in ways that are more compatible with the town's goals. The recommended "roadmap" is comprised of three major strategies:
 - **Guide growth to Kelley's Corner and key village centers** (e.g. West and South Acton) and encourage smaller residential units to provide more options for seniors and young people. Mixed-use small-scale development could provide desired additional restaurants and retail choices.
 - **Preserve Open Space** by purchasing priority parcels and using regulatory tools to guide growth away from the large tracts of land and to the centers resulting in preserving the rural characteristics and open space so appreciated by Acton residents.
 - **Actively promote employment-oriented economic development** that will increase the tax base and also create more local jobs and reduce commuting time for some residents.
- ❖ **And More...** The plan also addresses how we define our quality of life, and focuses on our needs for water, waste disposal, senior services, education, transportation, health, recreation, and safety, among others. Mindful of costs, the plan sets priorities for how we deliver services efficiently and phase improvements, capital expenditures and regulatory and managerial changes.

What the Plan Is and What it Can Do. The Plan is a **proactive approach to shaping the town's future.** It sets the direction and articulates a set of shared goals and objectives ; it identifies what town staff and volunteers should be working on. The Plan is both a roadmap that points us in a certain direction and a decision-making tool that helps us recognize when we're on the right path. The Plan can help to guide our Town's future growth and development.

What the Plan Is Not. The Plan does not **require the Town to move forward** on any of the initiatives it lists. As always, any zoning change or major expenditure is the decision of Town Meeting. Instead it is a recommendation of

the desired general direction based on what the majority of those who participated in the process expressed as their vision of the future; it is a tool to help steer the course and make decisions as opportunities and challenges arise. The Plan is also not a wish list; careful attention has been paid to priorities and feasibility.

Is the Plan better than "doing nothing"?

Doing "nothing" doesn't mean that nothing changes. The continuation of current trends will most likely result in maintaining the existing dispersed pattern of development with the majority of building occurring in outlying areas. It is likely that large parcels of land will develop (reducing the open space and thus negatively impacting town character) and Kelley's Corner and the villages will most likely change only slightly (and not necessarily in desired ways). Public infrastructure and services will not experience increased efficiencies and traffic will most likely become more of a problem.

When is this all going to happen? The Plan sets the general direction and identifies projects, studies, changes in management and/or regulatory practices recommended to meet the desired vision. **Many of these items will need individual Town Meeting approval** (especially if they require capital and/or operating costs) while other low or no cost items may be implemented sooner. The process is slow and deliberate; **there will be multiple opportunities to review and refine recommendations.** The Plan is intended to help guide decision-making over the next 20 years.

Isn't this all going to cost money that we just don't have?

While some of the implementation strategies cost money, many involve policy, administrative and other changes with little or no cost associated with them. It should be noted that the Plan also includes measures to help increase the Town's fiscal capacity, some of which can be used for paying for capital items. In terms of the items that cost money, they are of two sorts, **a) investments with expected fiscal dividends** in the future (e.g. fiscal savings and efficiencies) and **b) expenditures on improvements to quality of life** -- specific features that residents expressed a strong interest in -- with expected future returns in direct benefits as well as indirect ones, such as a stronger sense of community. The plan articulates the Town's priorities so that it is poised for when opportunities arise and investments can be made.

